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ABSTRACT

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ENHANCING THE STUDENT TEACHING EXPERIENCE
THROUGH DIVERSIFIED OBSERVATION AND FEEDBACK:
SOME SUPERVISORY CONTRIBUTIONS

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ABSTRACT

Student teaching supervisors have been criticized for failing to assume more active instructional leadership roles in the professional development of their charges. In this article, strategies are presented for expanding the role of the supervisor and thereby enhancing the learning climate for prospective teachers. In general, the strategies center on expanding the breadth and magnitude of student teachers' observational experiences and providing greater and more diversified sources of teaching feedback. More specifically, they include the direct instruction and modeling of effective observational skills, arranging opportunities for student teachers to observe in classrooms containing pupils of varying abilities, developmental levels, and special needs, and the coordination of peer, staff, administrative, and self-evaluations.

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Few educators would argue with the notion that student teaching represents an important phase in the professional development of novice teachers. As Beyer (1984) suggests, the student teaching experience is an almost universally accepted component of teacher education programs. During this extended field practicum, preservice teachers attempt to apply firsthand the considerable store of knowledge they have garnered in their training programs. Unfortunately, it is the rare training program that can fully prepare prospective teachers for meeting the myriad cognitive and interpersonal task demands that real educational settings necessarily require (Howey, Yarger, & Joyce, 1978). In their struggle to cope, improve, and perhaps excel, student teachers will inevitably engage in some amount of active discovery, confirmation, rethinking, and adjustment, processes that will ultimately help shape the fiber of their careers (Lindsey, 1971; Tabachnick & Zeichner, 1984).

The role of the college supervisor is to facilitate the continued professional growth of student teachers during this crucial stage of development. By implication, supervisors must play an active role in monitoring and guiding student teachers' emerging cognitive perceptions as well as their affective reactions to the learning environment. To serve as an effective change agent, supervisors must aim for a high level of engagement and influence, mediating between the so-called liberalizing impact of the university and the realistic/custodial impact of the school environment (Copeland, 1980; Hoy & Rees, 1977; Yee, 1969).

In this sense, the supervisory role transcends mere reaction and prescription (Bitlin, Ogawa, & Rose, 1984). It includes serving as an extended mentor; that is, helping student teachers not only make sense of the personal and institutional forces working upon them, but also to reconcile meaningfully the interactive and negotiable nature of student teaching socialization influences (Tabachnick & Zeichner, 1984). By virtue of their unique position to oversee the general gamut of the student teaching experience, supervisors possess the capability to make their charges true "students of teaching" (Cruikshank & Armaline, 1986).

Interestingly, some research suggests that university supervisors exert relatively little longterm impact on the behaviors, attitudes, teaching style, and skill of their charges (Morris, 1974; Schueler, Gold, & Mitzel, 1962). Others have gone so far as to suggest that the concept of college supervisors ought to be discarded altogether (Andrews, 1976; Bowman, 1979; Spillane & Levenson, 1976). Perhaps the fact that some supervisors do not appear to exert a significant impact pertains to restricted input into the quantity and quality of learning events their students will experience. In this vein, Diamonti (1977) has suggested that not all university supervisors fully embrace the role of an instructional leader. Instead, some supervisors may oversee students' practica in a conventional, somewhat limited contact model that includes making routine observations, providing lesson-related feedback, conducting seminars, and conferring formally with student and cooperating teachers midway and at the end of the practica (Emans, 1983). Generally, such a model might involve fairly minimal amounts of direct intervention and a limited degree of coordination over the total

student teaching experience. The idea that supervisors may presently exert a limited impact on prospective teachers should serve as a compelling rationale for initiating change in the model, rather than as a persuasive argument for throwing the supervisory role on the proverbial scrap heap.

This article presents a number of supervisory strategies drawn from personal experience that appear to enhance the learning climate of student teachers. Basically, the strategies endeavor to foster a more active and explicit role for the supervisor in the day to day coordination of activities for their trainees. For the student teachers themselves, the suggestions are intended to enrich and expand the quality of an already challenging and thought-provoking practical situation. The strategies range from the direct instruction and modeling of behaviors to merely suggesting potentially useful activities for the novices to undertake while housed in the schools. Most of the recommendations center on (1) expanding the range and breadth of student teachers' observational experiences and (2) providing greater and more diversified feedback to them. Certainly not all, or perhaps even many, of these suggestions will be totally functional or realistic in every instance. Individual differences among supervisors, student teachers, and school scenarios will surely need to be taken into consideration. However, by judiciously adopting these recommendations, supervisors could very well make an important difference in the professional maturation of their student teachers.

Providing Observational Training

At the outset of most practica, student teachers are both expected, and usually want, to do some amount of observation before they interact directly with the class. During observation, student teachers are encouraged to watch carefully as cooperating teachers conduct their complicated and demanding daily regimens. By focusing on teachers' behaviors as well as the intricate social dynamics existing within a classroom, student teachers can gain significant insights into the multifaceted roles they will be later assuming (Greenberg, 1983). From both the standpoint of the supervisor and cooperating teacher, student observation can be seen as capitalizing upon the powerful learning force of modeling. Here the complex behavioral patterns of experienced teachers can be indirectly conveyed and possibly transferred to prospective teachers through vicarious experiences (Cruikshank & Armaline, 1986). This modeling will hopefully allow student teachers to ease more comfortably into their active teaching roles. Regrettably, the typical observational roles of student teachers may be so ill-defined prior to observation that potentially useful learning activities are relegated to almost exclusively passive engagements.

In a very real sense, observation is an art that requires nurturing. Simply put, watching and analyzing are two different things. Without systematic guidance, student teachers may end up investing considerable amounts of time in an essentially unrewarding activity. This line of thinking clearly implies that student teachers must be trained to observe as well as to teach (Treiber, 1984). The rationale here is that one endeavor purposefully supports the other. Before

students do any formal observations, supervisors should be willing to discuss the kinds of things they personally look for when they evaluate others teach. Surely the discussions will focus primarily on the cognitive characteristics of effective teaching such as clarity, organization, continuity, and delivery as well as affective and social dimensions pertaining to interactions with students, administrators, cooperating teachers, and other faculty and staff (Goodman, 1983; Vaughan, 1984). If a formal observation form is typically used to evaluate teaching, the instrument should be explained in exhaustive detail. The precise meaning of each attribute assessed by the scale and the relative criteria by which each attribute is appraised need to be specified. Throughout this explanation process, student teachers should be free to seek clarification of any and all points. In this way, both supervisors and student teachers establish a lucid and mutual focus for future observation.

Of course, it is one thing to hear about observation and quite another to see directly how it is to be done. Early in the field placement, supervisors might ask the cooperating teacher for permission to make joint observations. In other words, before the student teacher is expected to assume direct instructional responsibilities, the supervisor will observe the cooperating teacher concomitantly with the student teacher and share constructive observational insights. During the joint observation, the supervisor models the precise behaviors that s/he will utilize later when evaluating the instructional effectiveness of the student teacher. The supervisor can essentially "think aloud" during the observation by jotting notes that will both allow the student

teacher to be privy to the supervisor's ongoing reactions and will later form the basis for a written performance critique.

The intent here is not to subject the cooperating teacher to intense scrutiny, but rather to demonstrate exactly what the supervisor will emphasize in later observations of the student teacher. This "non-invasive" intent of the joint observation should be clearly articulated to the cooperating teacher not only as a professional courtesy, but also to ensure a functional rapport. My experience has shown cooperating teachers to be far more receptive to this kind of arrangement than one might initially think. The insights that are shared during these joint observation sessions are, more often than not, the very ones that cooperating teachers will also hope to impart to student teachers during the practica anyway. Astute cooperating teachers are well aware that these insights can, in effect, make their own mentoring easier and so they are usually willing to honor proposals for joint observations. To the extent that joint observations solidify expectation sets for all parties, they reduce the formidable burden shared by each member of the student teacher/supervisor/sponsoring teacher triad. Since confident faculty tend to agree most readily to cooperating teacher roles, they are likely to believe that their model of teaching is one to be showcased rather than concealed. As long as university supervisors evidence a professional attitude and appear trustworthy, they will not be perceived as "classroom invaders", but rather as facilitators of the shared teaching and learning process.

Of course, human nature dictates that some teachers may be wary of being observed and, in a general sense, critiqued by someone other than

the student teacher. By all means, their wishes should be unconditionally honored. To prepare for this possibility, supervisors should devote some part of their pre-student teaching group seminars to viewing and analyzing previously-conducted videotaped lessons by former students or consenting teachers in practice. This ploy is advisable even when cooperating teachers have agreed in advance to joint observations. Not only does it set the stage for possible joint sessions, but it also has the additional advantage of being time course independent. By this, it is meant that even subtle and fleeting interactions can be thoroughly examined because of the videocassette recorder's (VCR) capability to retrieve events. The VCR provides a veritable "instant replay" that allows for immediate feedback and reinforcement. This feature of VCR's and the nature of the evaluation it permits will prove useful later when videotapes of the student teacher in action are analyzed in personal or group seminar sessions.

Expanding Observational Opportunities

Supervisors can take an active role in coordinating student teachers' observational experiences both early on in the placement and throughout the field practicum. In the early stages, most of the observation will naturally occur within the immediate classroom. Although the rate of "induction" clearly varies, some cooperating teachers withhold direct teaching opportunities from student teachers for considerable lengths of time (Cruikshank & Arneline, 1986). This practice tends to occur most often among conservative or territorial cooperating teachers who insist that student teachers observe their classrooms until such time as relinquishing responsibility to a virtual

stranger seems acceptable. Because even less conservative and territorial cooperating teachers may be somewhat reluctant to release responsibility, nearly all student teachers experience some amount of "down" or unfocused time.

Supervisors need to be alert to this possibility and to intervene by initiating a series of varied observational opportunities for student teachers. While it would be highly contradictory to argue now against the benefits of in-depth and thorough observational experiences, sooner or later, extended observations of the same teaching scenario cease to be significantly productive. There comes a point at which student teachers may experience sufficient ennui or anxiety that continued observation may represent more a source of stress than of additional learning. It can even be argued that extended observation in the same environment limits the opportunities for student teachers to engage in active, personal, and spontaneous discovery processes so much a part of a direct teaching role.

The point here is not for supervisors to eliminate the practice of extended observation, but rather to diversify it (Clift & Warner, 1986; Zeichner & Teitelbaum, 1982). Instead of having student teachers observe only within one teaching environment, supervisors should encourage them to visit classrooms across many grade levels, content areas, and ability ranges, as well as those classrooms whose purposes are very specialized. Some of this "outside the immediate placement" observation already takes place to some degree in most cases; however, many additional opportunities exist for expanding this type of observation over the duration of the practica.

Observing beyond the immediate placement yields important dividends. Student teachers have the opportunity to view firsthand the operations of other educators whose style and teaching situations may differ dramatically from what they experience in their cooperating teachers' rooms. How important is this type of observation? Most experienced supervisors would probably agree that in their travels they have encountered a wide range of teachers, schools, administrators, and students. Almost surely this diversified exposure has helped shape their own sets of expectations, attitudes, and beliefs about what constitutes good teaching and positive learning climates. If this is true, then it stands to reason that expanding the scope of student teachers' observations, once they have received training in what to look for, could result in a broader, more sophisticated, and refined teaching schema. In short, greater exposure tends to make for better informed teachers.

The beauty of this adage is that it works in both an expected and somewhat unexpected manner. Intuitively, it stands to reason that student teachers would benefit from exposure to the best role models available, and in scheduling observations, cooperating teachers and supervisors should seek to deliver just this kind of quality exposure. Interestingly, though, exposure to poor teaching models can also contribute to the maturation of prospective teachers (Treiber, 1984). Assuming that training programs and university supervisors have provided, and continue to provide, knowledge about effective instructional practices, the various contexts of teaching, and change and improvement processes (Vaughan, 1984), then student teachers can

not only detect inadequate teaching behaviors in inferior models, but also speculate about and formulate alternative strategies possessing immediate and personal relevance.

Another important reason for encouraging outside observations during student teaching is that even among practicing professionals, the opportunities for peer observation are at best limited, and most likely, virtually non-existent (Lortie, 1975). Once teachers begin their first official assignments, their perception of the educational enterprise is restricted largely to their own immediate classroom experience and what they hear and read from indirect sources such as other teachers, school administrators, consultants, newspapers, periodicals, and books. In any case, observational opportunities are sufficiently rare once regular classroom teaching commences that student teaching practica seem to represent a critical chance to see what is happening beyond four proximal walls. As overseers of practica experiences, supervisors can help their students gain insights into broader mechanisms operating within the larger educational spectra.

As a beginning step to developing an awareness of other teaching environments, student teachers, their cooperating teachers, and supervisors should collaboratively plan a series of "outside" observations. Visits can be arranged to classrooms in other grade levels within the school, and if possible, in other buildings within the district. These observations will help novice teachers develop a sense of what students in their classroom may have already experienced and what they are likely to encounter in the future. Again, individuals' perceptions of the nature and purpose of educational systems will be

narrow if they have only a vague understanding of other developmental phases of instruction (Clift & Warner, 1986). Ideally, diversified observations would generate a more well-rounded view of a gamut ranging from early childhood, to primary, intermediate, and secondary education.

Supervisors might also find it useful to help student teachers plan observations in classes of differing ability levels. Oftentimes, a student teacher's particular placement might only entail working with either very low or very high ability students. Knowledge of the other ability levels would help prepare student teachers for future placements that are quite dissimilar from their present setting. Visits to the reading specialist, learning disabilities teacher, speech therapist, and gifted educator could all be extremely enlightening. Even if observations of these classrooms cannot be arranged, student teachers would profit from merely talking with these special educators. It is important for prospective teachers to know what their students experience when they leave the classroom to attend these special classes. Some supervisors might also be compelled to schedule visits to non-standard school sites so that their student teachers can witness the instructional environments of deaf, profoundly retarded, and socially and emotionally disturbed children. Obviously, realism imposes limitations on the number of such visits that can be made. Student teachers, their cooperating teaching sponsors, and supervisors should jointly select and plan those visitations that would appear to be of maximum benefit. As Scannel, Denemark, Dieterle, and Egbert (1983) indicate, carefully designed and supervised field-based observations constitute powerful learning experiences.

Another possibility for meaningful observation involves scheduling student teachers to see other student teachers in action. Such a recommendation hinges on the known utility of cooperative learning among peers (Johnson & Johnson, 1985), and more specifically, the apparent facilitative effects of pairing student teachers with one another (Gallagher, Romano, Sunflower, & Shepherd, 1983). In my supervisory work, the practice of peer observation, though generally useful, has proven especially beneficial when talented and less talented individuals can be paired at some point during the semester. The less talented student teachers benefit by observing competent peers modeling effective teaching behaviors. The observation usually helps demonstrate to these student teachers that the changes in teaching demeanor their supervisors have been encouraging are both appropriate and clearly obtainable. A twofold benefit occurs when less talented student teachers are observed by their more talented peers. The talented novice usually recognizes the differences that exist and gains a greater appreciation for the personal growth that has occurred. More importantly, the talented individual may be able to make suggestions in a manner that is overall less threatening and perhaps more understandable than that of either the cooperating teacher or supervisor. This same phenomena occurs occasionally in classrooms when teachers, exasperated over failing to explain a concept adequately to a student, watch in near disbelief as another student offers some input that immediately and easily resolves the confusion. Regardless of the ability differential existing between any two or more student teachers, peer appraisal and assistance stands to contribute purposefully to professional development.

Diversifying Feedback

For student teachers to evidence growth, they must receive timely and informative feedback about their performance. Without guidance, they may continue to make the same mistakes day after day, while not recognizing the positive behaviors they are exhibiting. Sensitizing student teachers to proper and improper actions has traditionally fallen heavily on the shoulders of cooperating teachers, and by virtue of limited contact, somewhat less so on supervisors. Even when these two feedback sources prove functional, it is advisable for student teachers to receive input from other knowledgeable professionals if possible.

At least two viable sources for additional observation exist within the school: administrators and other faculty. Principals and vice-principals are often willing to observe preservice teachers, particularly when they have reason to suspect that the individual might be a good candidate for future teaching positions in the school or district. They may bring a rather unique perspective to the observation which influences the student teacher in a way that neither the cooperating teacher nor supervisor can achieve. It is quite possible, for instance, that these administrators may use an observational system that emphasizes somewhat different characteristics of effective instruction than those stressed by the supervisor and cooperating teacher. In post-observation discussions, the various differences in perspectives can be identified and possibly reconciled into a meaningful gestalt through qualification and elaboration of respective belief systems. When the emphases conflict beyond resolution, student teachers come to realize that throughout their careers they may have to cope with

the notion that definitions of effective teaching are likely to vary somewhat from source to source. At a minimum, the whole process of being observed by a principal or administrator helps prepare student teachers for similar kinds of "graded" formal observations that will occur as part of their regular teaching assignments in the future.

Other teachers in the school can also bring their expertise to bear on the development of student teachers. The problem, of course, is freeing them from their own responsibilities long enough to perform observations. This obstacle can be bypassed through the practice of trade days. During trade days, the cooperating teacher and another teacher in the school switch assignments. The cooperating teacher serves as a surrogate for the volunteer faculty member, while that individual, in turn, spends the entire day observing, advising, and interacting with the student teacher. In my experience, both faculty members tend to welcome the change. The cooperating teacher enjoys the active involvement, particularly at those latter points in the semester when the student teacher is expected to be doing all or the vast majority of the teaching. The other faculty member tends to embrace the one-day affair as a refreshing break from the regular routine. Most importantly, the student teacher gets useful input from still another qualified source. At the end of the day, the cooperating teacher, the guest observer, and the student teacher meet to discuss the performance all together or in any of the three possible pairings. Supervisors can also participate in the meetings and encourage more trade days with different teachers if the practice seems to work well.

The final recommended sources for observation are the student teachers themselves. Fortunately, the advent of videocassette recorders has made self-observation a practical reality. VCR technology is not only more affordable and accessible than ever before, but also it has evolved to the point whereby newer camera models are small enough to make the recording process less obtrusive and potentially distracting. It is difficult to imagine a much more striking way of illustrating and reinforcing concepts about teaching than by allowing prospective teachers to observe themselves actively engaged in the process. Videocassette recording permits student teachers to see firsthand both their weak and strong points and allows supervisors and cooperating teachers to recapture critical, transient episodes that possess enormous instructional value. Because the VCR produces a faithful account of teaching events, when the tape is replayed at post-observation conferences, the feedback assumes a more concrete and nearly immediate character. And because the teaching record can be replayed indefinitely, opportunities for repetition and reinforcement are essentially limitless. Another of the desirable attributes of VCR's is that the tapes can be viewed at the mutual convenience of all parties in the triad either individually or as a group. Given the enormous number of advantages of videocassette recorders, it is likely that they will play an important role in the professional development of teachers at all levels of experience in the future.

A Final Word

A nearly ideal scenario would involve the supervisor, student teacher, and the cooperating sponsor working collaboratively toward a common goal: the professional development of the prospective teacher (Yee, 1969). In this scenario, the supervisor has prepared the student teacher for qualitative observation and instruction prior to the field practicum. Later, the student teacher, the sponsor, and the supervisor identify a reasonable set of additional observation opportunities and schedule them into the plan for the semester. Throughout the practicum, the cooperating teacher and supervisor ensure that the student teacher receives feedback from multiple sources. All the while the student teacher, with the guidance of the supervisor, attempts to integrate and reconcile the feedback against the backdrop of personal and professional expectations. The cooperating teacher and supervisor should see at least one lesson completely through to its logical conclusion; that is, from inception to implementation. This procedure would first involve interacting with the student in the formative stages of a lesson, perhaps through both the modeling and thinking aloud of written planning behaviors and through formal explanations of rationale. Next, it would entail providing pre-delivery suggestions for enhancing the lesson's potency from cognitive, affective, and social standpoints. Finally, the triad would jointly evaluate the lesson immediately after its implementation and/or later by means of videocassette recorder technology.

As stated earlier, the suggestions offered here need to be tempered by the realities of time availability and individual differences among

student teachers, cooperating teachers, and supervisors. The recommendations may need to be amended, discarded, and expanded depending on the nature of the situation; however, the role of the supervisor can and should be expanded purposefully. Through careful and selective monitoring and shaping of the student teaching experience, supervisors can contribute more significantly to the professional growth and development of novice teachers.

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